

# DIFFERENT ASPECTS AND STUDENTS' FEEDBACK TOWARD EFFECTIVE FRESHER ORIENTATION IN SRI LANKAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

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## ABSTRACT

*Only a limited number of Advanced Level qualified Sri Lankan students to enter public universities due to the limited number of intake by the public university system of Sri Lanka. Yet, some of the degree programs cannot retain the required number of students due to inherent issues of the university system. Conducting well-structured orientation program can be part of the solution to some of the deep-rooted issues in Sri Lankan university system and, such a program was conducted at the Wayamba University of Sri Lanka to test the effectiveness of different aspects of orientation towards student retention. The orientation was based on key factors, viz, familiarization to the novel environment and culture; provision of required skills to follow university academic programs; develop creativity and critical thinking with the aid of social programs; build trust with the university communities and provide hope for the future; and provide opportunities to entertainment and skill development. The program was conducted for 26 days and students participated with great enthusiasm. Caring and provision of the sense of belonging was a key element retaining the students during the orientation. Further, skill development programs and entertainment activities provided a solid foundation for the academic program and cohesion among the fresher colleagues needed for effective university life.*

**KEYWORDS:** Higher Education, University & Orientation

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Only a fraction of Sri Lankan Advanced Level passed students enter into public universities due to limited intake by public sector universities. In the year 2014/2015 out of the eligible candidates (who attained the minimum requirements laid by the University Grants Commission), 17.1% admitted to the public universities (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2016). Yet, a number of vacancies were created in the universities due to vacancy filling issues by universities and the University Grants Commission. More importantly, some of the registered students leave respective courses due to lack of prospect and issues related to the degree programs and institutions. Some of the said issues are deep-rooted for decades in Sri Lankan higher education and genuine support of the university administration and academics are very much essential in rectifying said issues. Even though, well-organized orientation could rectify some of the issues and provide some relief to the fresher relatively for some time period.

Faculty of Livestock, Fisheries, and Nutrition of the Wayamba University of Sri Lanka conducted an orientation for the fresher students who enrolled for the B. Sc in Food Science and Nutrition and B. Sc in Food Production and Technology Management degree programs. The above program was conducted for 26 full days to

orient the fresher students to familiarize with the university culture and for a smooth transition towards academic programs.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

### **2.1 Orientation Design**

In designing the activities, orientation committee discussed with the academics, senior students, and referred to previous orientation-documents. With the above information, as well as by the utilization of the past experiences, aspects needed to cover during the orientation were decided. Activities to achieve the outcomes of the different aspects were decided considering the available resources of the university and the vicinity, time availability, financial resources and effectiveness of the outcome compared to allocated resources.

### **2.2 Implementation of the Orientation**

Orientation committee presented the designed program to the senior students as well as to the Faculty Board of the Faculty of Livestock, Fisheries, and Nutrition for the awareness as well as to get the necessary approval for the implementation. Periodically fine adjustments were conducted to facilitate smooth execution of the program. Responsibilities to implement the different activities were allocated to the orientation committee members with the assistance of academic, academic support, administrative and non-academic staff. It was decided to conduct the program as much as possible in the English language since the medium of instruction of the University is English.

### **2.3 Student Feedback**

Last day of the orientation was a full day cultural visit to Munneswaram temple and St. Ann's church at Thalawila in Sri Lanka. As part of the orientation, students organized a half a day talent show to complete the orientation on the day before the cultural visit. Therefore, students' feedback toward the orientation was taken to evaluate 36 activities out of the total of 38. All the participants were given a structured questionnaire to mark their participation in the activity and thereafter, students evaluated the effectiveness of the different activities of the orientation using five-point Hedonic Scale. Further few open-ended questionnaires were also given to get students' feedback for important aspects.

### **2.4 Data Analysis**

All the feedback questionnaire information was fed into Microsoft Excel and activities related to the same aspect was categorized. Then the data were analyzed for descriptive statistics.

## **3. RESULTS**

### **3.1 Student Composition**

At the end of the last day of orientation 66 students were retaining at the Faculty of Livestock, Fisheries, and Nutrition. All the retained students have participated in the feedback collection. Due to the vacancy filling procedure of the University Grants Commission, students enrolled in the Faculty in various stages of the orientation. At the last day of orientation, only 55% of the first intake was retaining at the two-degree programs.

### **3.2 Different Aspects of the Orientation**

Nine main aspects were identified to serve during the orientation. Some of the activities designed were serving more than one aspect. Identified aspects, designed activities and tasks, and respective time allocation for the aspects are

given in Table 1.

**Table 1: Different Aspects Covered During the Orientation and Respective Tasks and Time Allocation**

	Aspect	Activities/Tasks	Time Allocation (h)	Percentage Time (%)
1	Familiarization with university and academic programs	Inaugural session, Introduction to Departments, Introduction to academic programs, Administrative aspects, Library orientation	19	9.4
2	Mechanisms for foreseeable issue resolution	Mentoring session, Counselling session, Career guidance activities, Industrial expectations lecture	7	3.5
3	University discipline and related legal aspects	University discipline workshop by deputy proctor, Anti-ragging Act explanation, Role of Sri Lankan police on dispute resolution	4	2
4	Creativity enhancement needed for well rounded graduate	Film criticism, Song criticism, Photography workshop, Drama training workshop	21.5	10.6
5	Health aspects for university life	Role of university medical center, First aid training, Mental fitness for undergraduate life, Reproductive health and sexually transmitted diseases	8	4
6	Student life at the university	Student societies, University memories bypassed out graduates, Physical education of undergraduates, Team building activities, Outbound training, Social activities for undergraduates	43.5	21.5
7	Training for academic activities	Mini-lectures, Lecture taking training sessions, Practical session, Practical entering training sessions, Field visits, Factory visits	27	13.4
8	Development of essential skills (Other units)	English lectures by ELTU, Computer lectures by ICT center, Mathematics lectures	42	20.8
9	Spiritual wellbeing	Dharma discussions, Cultural visits for places of religious importance	14	6.9
10	Platform to stage student talents	Practice session for talent show, Talent show	16	7.9

### 3.3 Student Feedback for Different Aspects and Activities

Out of the aspects related to university familiarization, as per the student feedback, the inaugural session was the most effective. Further, students stated library orientation and introduction to the Departments were equally effective compared to other activities of the aspect.

Counselling workshop rated the best among the mechanisms for foreseeable issue resolution. Out of the participants, 80.6% strongly agreed and 19.4% agreed that the activity met the expectations of the training.

Lecture conducted by a Sri Lanka police (Pannala Police Station) rated the most effective among the activities related to University discipline and related legal aspects.

Training on drama conducted by Mr. Jayalal Rohana and Mr. Janaka Ranasinghe, as well as film criticism on the Indian movie Mr. & Mrs. Iyer rated the highest among the creativity enhancement activities. Over 54% strongly agreed and over 32% agreed that the above programs met the expected outcomes.

Reproductive health and sexually transmitted diseases workshop conducted by Dr. Nihal Edirisinghe was rated the best, having 70% strong agreement by students in relation to the meeting of expectations, during the health sessions.

Among the activities related to the student life, Out Bound Training and Social Activity (*Sharmadana* conducted at the Sandalankawa Elders Home) were the best activities having over 94% of student consent (strongly agreeing) that the activity met the expectations.

Students have appreciated all the mini-lectures and practical sessions, lecture note taking sessions and practical entering sessions as equally important sessions. In open-ended answers, they requested to have a higher number of above activities in future orientations to have better training.

English lectures had the highest rating (44.6% strongly agreeing it met the expectations), while mathematics lectures (26.2% strongly agreeing it met the expectations), had lowest rating among the lectures conducted by supporting units of the university.

### 3.4 Limitations of the Orientation

A significant number of students requested to improve the delivery of mathematics lectures as a common request. Further, they wanted to have a longer orientation and more time for the talent show preparation.

The official language of the degree program is English and there were Tamil and Muslim students who were not familiar with the Sinhala language, which is used by the majority of Sri Lanka. It was very difficult to find the resource persons to conduct the activities in English medium. In some cases, even the orientation committee requested the resource persons to conduct the activities in English medium, training were conducted either in Sinhala or Sinhala and English mix, due to the limited language competency of the resource person.

Senior students did not corporate with the organization committee and they started ragging during the orientation. The sufficient support was not given by various entities/persons of the university to make the environment conducive and peaceful to conduct the orientation effectively.

## 4. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

In improving the effectiveness in education, it is important to encourage the contacts between students and faculty. During the orientation, arrangements were made to contact faculty with fresher in various activities (mentoring, invitation to guest lectures, performing talent show etc.) for the familiarization of faculty among the fresher. Chickering and Gamson (1987) also showed the importance of making the bridge between students and faculty during the freshman period for the effective education. The bridge developed between the faculty and students during the orientation would be an added advantage for the students to the academic explorations as well as to resolve issues cropping up during the study period.

Student retention was poor for the degree programs during the past and many factors affected the student retention rates. Orientation period was about 10 days during the past, yet the present orientation was about two months. With compared to the orientation conducted during the past, present orientation included a variety of different activities. Further, during the orientation, students were very well taken cared from evil elements such as ragging. It gives them a sense that they are well protected and taken care of by the university. Even though many students got opportunities in higher demanded courses during the vacancy filling process by the University Grants Commission, most of them retained at the

two-degree programs without leaving the Wayamba University of Sri Lanka. A retention rate of initial intake was 55% and it is a very high percentage compared to previous intakes. A sense of belonging (Kember *et al.*, 2010) is part of the motivational orientation that helps to retain undergraduates in enrolled programs. As part of the orientation design, activities were included to build trust and a sense of belonging. Provision of the sense of belonging at the Faculty could retain many students for the degree programs.

In designing the orientation, special emphasis was given to provide the fresher a positive social interaction among the peer as well as to have a sense of responsibility toward society. Hence, they were given team building activities, outbound training, field visits, opportunities to conduct social activities (Helping the senior citizens at elders home) and cultural visits etc. Such activities provided sufficient opportunities to interact with peers, which is essential for the fresher grandaunts to conduct studies effectively. In a study conducted in Ohio University (Williford *et al.*, 2001) it was revealed that the academic performance, as well as student retention, are higher in the students who participated in the orientation compared to the non-participants. Therefore, it is expected to have higher performance among the present students during the studies.

The language used in orientation plays an essential role in orientations of the multicultural society such as Sri Lanka. Unless using a common language, ethnic minority students will less likely to fit into the orientation. Though the orientation committee tried their best to find the resource persons with required language competency, some of the programs were conducted with the English and Sinhalese mix. Further, dissatisfactions of ethnic minorities were expressed in open-ended question. Language plays a major role in orientations where orientations control perceptions (Ruíz, 1984), therefore, it is essential to conduct orientations in a common language fitting the multicultural community in a society such as Sri Lanka. Common language provides a sense of equity for ethnic minorities and avoids segregations during the study periods with the basis of ethnicity.

It is important to have an attractive orientation to make the fresher a memorable university life. Further, a properly planned orientation provides higher academic performance during the study (Owusu *et.al*, 2014). Support of administration, academic, and senior students are essential components, which are not given most often, to have effective orientation in Sri Lankan public universities. This study provides some insight for the academics in organizing and conducting orientations more effectively in Sri Lankan university system.

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